

Inappropriate use of definites in Turkish-German bilinguals

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Introduction

Definite noun phrases (NPs) require a referent that is uniquely identifiable from the current discourse. The contextually appropriate use of (in-)definite NPs can be difficult for children (e.g. Maratsos, 1976), second language (L2) learners (e.g. Ionin et al., 2004) and heritage language speakers (HSs) (e.g. De Groot, 2005; Montrul & Ionin, 2010). HSs' lack of target-like sensitivity to definiteness distinctions may reflect incomplete grammatical acquisition (e.g. Montrul, 2008) or divergent attainment due to L2 dominance and/or reduced input conditions (e.g. Pascual y Cabo & Rothman, 2012). A recent study by Kupisch et al. (2016), however, showed that Turkish-German bilinguals have no difficulty applying syntactic restrictions on the use of definites in either Turkish and German.

Research question: Is the ability to use contextual-pragmatic cues to (in-)definiteness compromised in Turkish-German bilinguals who acquired a societally dominant second language alongside their home language during childhood?

Definiteness in Turkish and German

NPs are marked for definiteness in both Turkish and German. In German, definiteness distinctions are marked by prenominal articles. Turkish is a differential object marking (DOM) language that lacks a definite article but uses the prenominal determiner *bir* ('one') to indicate indefiniteness.

Table 1. Definiteness distinctions in Turkish

	Definite	Indefinite
Non-specific		Bir kitap 'a book'
Specific	Kitabı 'the book _{ACC} '	Bir kitabı 'one of the books _{ACC} '

Table 2. Definiteness distinctions in German

	Definite	Indefinite
Singular	der / den Baum 'the _{NOM} / the _{ACC} tree'	ein / einen Baum 'a _{NOM} / a _{ACC} tree'

Method

- Untimed multiple-choice discourse-completion tasks
- **Experiment 1 (Turkish):** Three context types (i) Definite, (ii) Indefinite Nonspecific, (iii) Indefinite Specific; three answer choices
- **Experiment 2 (German):** Three context types (i) Definite, (ii) Indefinite Plural, (iii) Indefinite Quantified; two answer choices
- **Experiment 3 (German):** Neutral context; choice of morphosyntactically correct vs. incorrect determiner (*definite* vs. *indefinite*) – adjective – noun concord

Example, Experiment 1:

DEFINITE CONTEXT: *Masada bir kitap vardı. Ayşe'nin başka bir işi yoktu. _____.*
'There was a book on the table. Ayşe had nothing else to do.'

EXPECTED ANSWER: *Ayşe kitabı okudu.*
'Ayşe read the book.'

Example, Experiment 2:

DEFINITE CONTEXT: *Auf dem Tisch liegt ein Brief. _____.*
'There is a letter on the table.'

EXPECTED ANSWER: *Nina öffnet den Brief.*
'Nina opens the letter.'

Table 3. Demographic details of our participants

Participants	N	Age	AoA (min/max)		Language proficiency (0/10)		Daily language use (%)	
			Turkish	German	Turkish	German	Turkish	German
Turkish Monolinguals	25	23.80 (21-26)	0/1	NA	-	-	-	-
German Monolinguals	25	27.17 (18-35)	NA	0/1	-	-	-	-
Late bilinguals	21	19.28 (18-32)	0/1	14/19	9.30 (7.25-10)	5.52 (4.5-9)	77.38 (50-100)	29.44 (0-100)
Heritage speakers	20	29.20 (17-45)	0/1	0/14	8.31 (3.5-10)	8.57 (3-10)	62.5 (25-100)	60.58 (50-100)

Results

Table 4. Participants' responses in Experiment 1

Condition / answer	MONOLINGUAL			LATE BILINGUAL			HERITAGE		
	Definite Specific	Indefinite Nonspecific	Indefinite Specific	Definite Specific	Indefinite Nonspecific	Indefinite Specific	Definite Specific	Indefinite Nonspecific	Indefinite Specific
Definite NP	90%	11,5%	12%	81,5%	14,8%	8,3%	78,7%	22,5%	21,8%
Indefinite NP	8,5%	67%	68,5%	12,5%	73,8%	72,7%	15,6%	56,2%	57,5%
Indef. Specific NP	1,5%	21,5%	19,5%	5,9%	11,3%	19%	5,6%	21,3%	20,6%

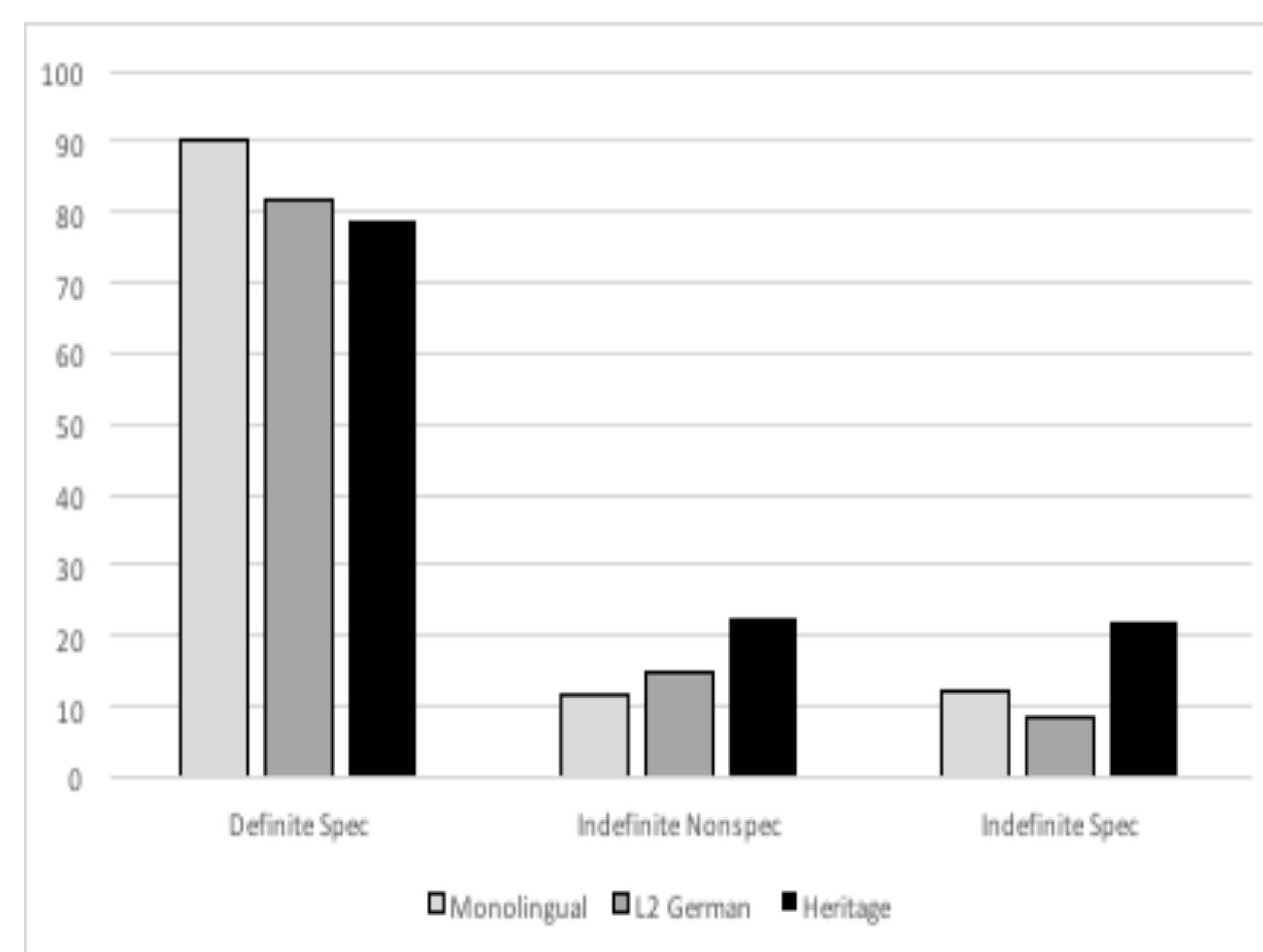


Figure 1. Percentages of "definite" responses across conditions in Experiment 1

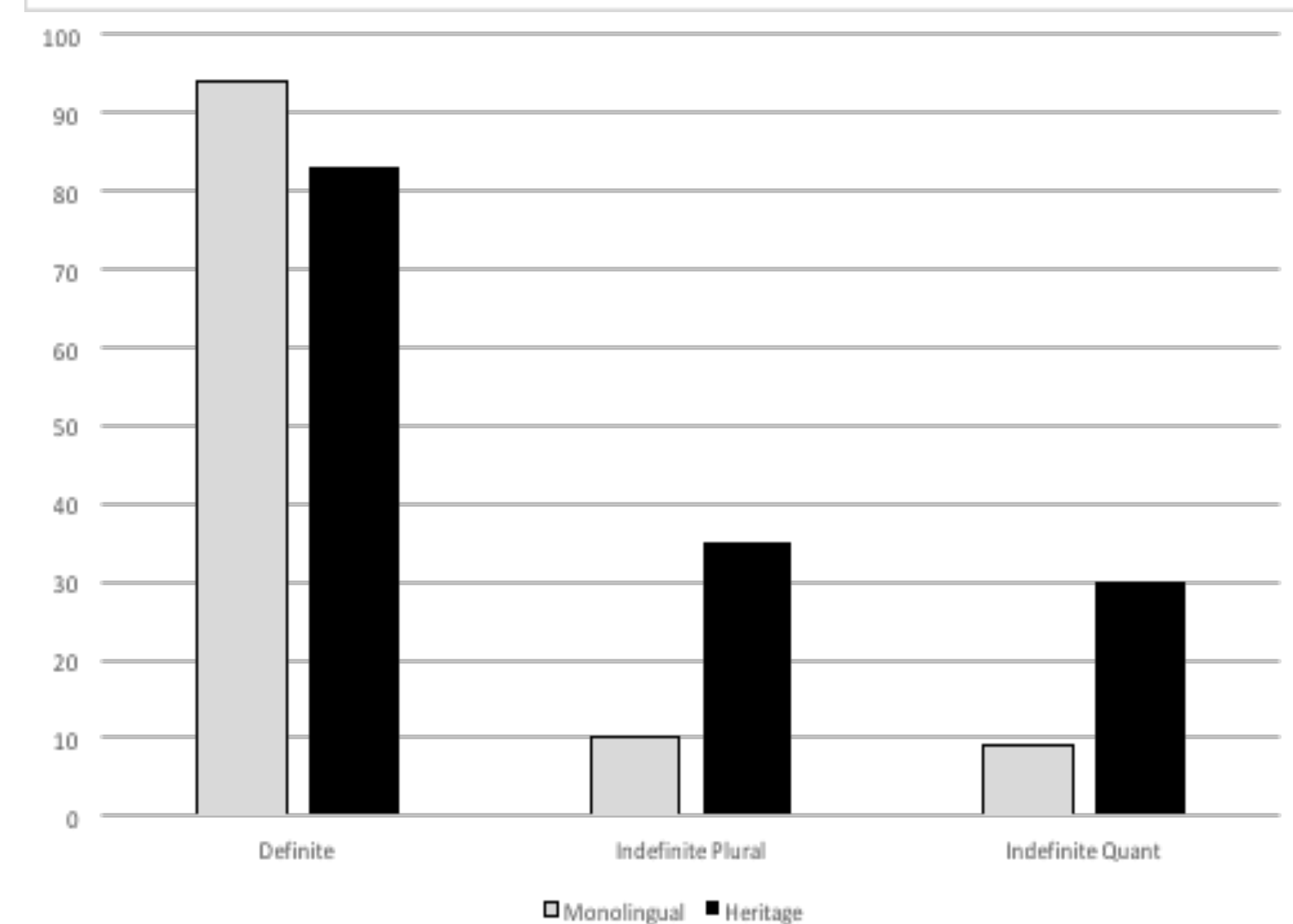


Figure 2. Percentages of "definite" responses across conditions in Experiment 2

Summary

- HSs over-extend the use of definites to pragmatic contexts where an indefinite answer option would normally be appropriate in both Turkish (Experiment 1) and German (Experiment 2).
- Experiment 3: HSs are highly accurate; no difference between definite (84% correct) and indefinite determiners (87% correct)

Discussion

- Our results indicate divergent attainment in both of our heritage bilinguals' languages, with the 'uniqueness' requirement on definites possibly being weakened.
- Our findings are in line with the hypothesis that language structures that require the integration of syntactic and semantic/pragmatic features are particularly vulnerable in both heritage and L2 grammars (e.g. Sorace, 2011).

Scan QR code for our abstract



References

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